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ABSTRACT

This digest looks at two community college programs designed to aid students with disabilities in accessing the educational offerings of the college, as well as two programs that help students with disabilities attain jobs after their educational goals have been met. Longview Community College, in Lee's Summit, Missouri, offers the Academic Bridges to Learning Effectiveness (ABLE) program. ABLE is a support service program designed to teach students with learning disabilities or brain injuries the skills needed to become independent learners. Florence-Darlington Technical College in Florence, South Carolina, designed the Program Accessibility Committee (PAC) in order to recommend appropriate action to the administration to ensure access for students with disabilities. North Iowa Area Community College in Mason City, Iowa, has developed a career placement project with four areas of placement services to assist students with disabilities to prepare for successful careers. In addition, the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, has a career placement and preparedness program designed to help community college students with disabilities find employment after college. This digest makes recommendations to community colleges regarding working with students with disabilities, stressing the need for training staff members in disability issues. (NB)

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Serving Students with Disabilities at the Community College

ERIC Digest

By

Mary Prentice

ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges

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Digest

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Serving Students with Disabilities at the Community College

By Mary Prentice

People with disabilities make up the single largest minority group in the United States. Over the past ten years the traditional profile of disabled persons as older, poorer, less educated and less likely to be employed has begun to change. This is due in part to a "dramatic increase" in the number of students with disabilities who are seeking higher education (Smith, 1998). This increase is attributed to, among other things, enhanced technology, expanded support service programs, and higher expectations of what students with disabilities can accomplish. A majority of these students have turned to two-year colleges for their educational needs; of the students with disabilities in higher education institutions in 1997-1998, fifty-five percent were enrolled in community colleges (Lewis and Ferris, 1999).

To begin serving students with disabilities, college personnel must require documentation of the disability so that appropriate services can be arranged. Once a student has indicated that he or she may need assistance, an assortment of curricular, pedagogical, and technological services can be offered in a variety of configurations. Norris and Vasquez (1998) and Smith (1998) detail these services as follows:

- Curricular: special course groupings and faculty training on strategies that faculty can use to integrate students with disabilities into their classrooms.
- Pedagogical: providing oral testing, tutors, sign language interpreters, readers, note-takers, and extended testing time
- Technological: books on tape, assistive computer technology, tape recorders, and magnifying devices.

In addition to providing services, many community colleges have designed specific programs to help students with disabilities, including strategies to assist students to be successful in the classroom and to locate employment when they have completed their education. Faculty acceptance and the development of a student-oriented approach have been found to be essential components of creating effective disability programs (Treloar, 1999).

This Digest presents two examples of successful community college initiatives designed to aid students in accessing the educational offerings of the college. It also provides two examples of initiatives designed to enhance career placement options for students with disabilities. The Digest concludes with suggestions for serving this population.

Programs for Classroom Success

Longview Community College, Lee's Summit, Missouri

At Longview Community College, Academic Bridges to Learning Effectiveness (ABLE) is a support service program designed to teach individuals with learning disabilities or brain injuries the skills needed to become independent learners. ABLE's advantage is that it provides a structured curriculum to help students learn the skills needed to succeed in college. Every student in the program takes a basic core of courses related to personal awareness, assertiveness skills, and college survival skills. Other courses are offered for students who need to build basic academic skills. Additionally, former ABLE students, as well as students recruited from Phi Theta Kappa, are paired with new ABLE students to strengthen peer relationships and increase integration into mainstream campus life (Gugerty and Knutsen, 2000a). Through the support of the ABLE program, the majority of students pass their classes with a "C" or better, and over 80% of ABLE students are retained from one semester to the next. ABLE students are also more likely to transfer to a four-year institution than students with disabilities who are not enrolled in ABLE (Gugerty and Knutsen, 2000a).

Florence-Darlington Technical College (FDTC), Florence, South Carolina

The Program Accessibility Committee (PAC) at FDTC was designed to recommend appropriate action to the administration to ensure access into FDTC by students with disabilities, and to provide any appropriate accommodations that might be necessary to assure entry into FDTC (Gugerty and Knutsen, 2000b). The majority of the students at FDTC have cognitive disabilities, learning disabilities, neurological disabilities, and health impairments. One unique feature of the PAC is the training and orientation that staff provides for newly hired faculty. PAC has been able to influence how instruction is provided to students with disabilities through a guidebook given to new faculty and staff. This guidebook addresses questions and concerns that may arise when assisting students with disabilities, including issues dealing with curriculum, course requirements, and testing. Because of this level of involvement, the majority of students report satisfaction with the services that are provided at FDTC (Gugerty and Knutsen, 2000b).

Programs for Employment Success

Community colleges have also created programs that help students with disabilities attain jobs after their educational goals have been met. Traditionally, graduates with disabilities have needed a significantly longer time to locate employment, partly because people with disabilities may lack the skills needed to sell themselves in an interview and may feel discomfort with self-advocating for accommodations that would help them succeed at work (Norton and Field, 1998)

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North Iowa Area Community College, Mason City, Iowa

Staff members at North Iowa Area Community College have developed a career placement project with four areas of placement services to assist students with disabilities to prepare for successful careers. The four areas of placement services are career exploration, job readiness, job-seeking skills, and job shadowing. Students are given individual career counseling, access to computerized career exploration, and job shadowing opportunities, and are enrolled in a 15-session job-seeking skills class. During an evaluation of the first three years of the program, it was ascertained that career preparedness in students with disabilities enrolled in the program had been greater than in students with disabilities who had not participated (Norton and Field, 1998).

College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, Illinois

The College of DuPage, a Midwestern suburban community college, has a career placement and preparedness program designed to help community college students with disabilities find employment after college. Students with disabilities at this community college are given access to the cooperative education (co-op) program on campus. Co-op programs may benefit students with disabilities because they have multiple objectives such as academic skill development, career development, and personal growth. Indeed, participants in this program have indicated that they have more awareness of the world of work and a better understanding of the emotional, educational, and skill requirements for various occupations (Trach and Harney, 1998).

Suggestions for Working with Students with Disabilities

One commonality among the four programs highlighted here is an understanding and acceptance of the support needs of students with disabilities. Staff members in the programs described have been educated in disability issues and how they might be addressed in a community college. Unfortunately, most educators have not had the benefit of such training. As Treloar (1999) stated, "Few teachers in community colleges have any significant prior exposure to disability. As a result, disabled persons may feel misunderstood in educational settings and negatively affected by teacher perceptions about disability" (p. 31). To better serve students with disabilities, faculty and staff members at community colleges should be trained in four areas: creating receptive environments, becoming aware of language, applying the ADA to community college settings, and promoting the success of students with disabilities. This involves treating students with disabilities as people, seeing them as able and accepting their differences, learning the appropriate language of disability, recognizing a student who may have a disability and modifying teaching and learning situations appropriately, and adopting a student-oriented approach to providing education for people with disabilities (Treloar, 1999).

Conclusion

People with disabilities are increasingly turning to higher education to achieve their career and professional goals. As they arrive, community college personnel need to welcome these students to their campuses while constantly searching for additional curricular, pedagogical, and technical approaches to support these learners in achieving their goals. More professional development focusing on recognizing a student with a disability and making appropriate teaching and learning modifications, needs to be designed for community college faculty and staff. If college personnel continue to develop the attitudes of inclusion and acceptance that have shaped the disability programs described here, students with disabilities are likely to continue choosing community colleges as the avenue for fulfilling their academic aspirations. Indeed, it is this acceptance of all that should be at the heart of disability programs on community college campuses.

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